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Critical Edition of "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" (Third Place)

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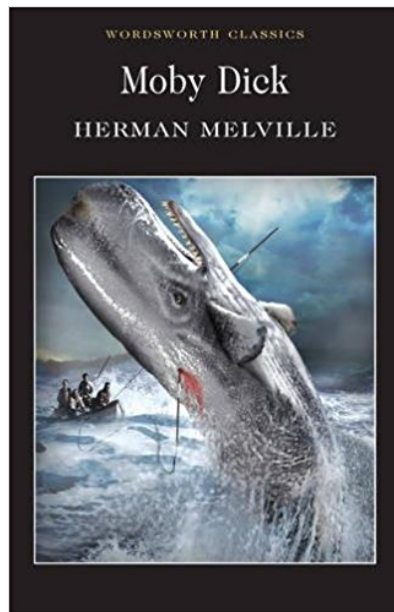
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Critical Edition of “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”

Adams Freeman

FYS: Bob Dylan

Fall 2017



Introduction

“Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” was written by Bob Dylan which appeared on the 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home*. The song was the last song on the A side of the album which included songs that were backed with a plugged in, rock and roll sounding band. The song tells the story of arriving to America on the *Mayflower* which also doubles as the whaling ship, called the *Pequod*, from *Moby Dick*. The song combines allusions to American history, literature, and religion to form a kind of wacky critique of American society. The narrator is introduced to several characters in this tale including a caricature of Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick* who is called Captain Arab. The narrator also encounters historical figures and places like Captain Kidd, an English pirate, and Bowery, the Civil War Era Manhattan migrant slum. Dylan uses imagery from the stories told in our history class and the story from *Moby Dick* to criticize American society during the sixties. “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” is a six minute and thirty-one second critique on the founding and modern-day practice of American values.

The very obvious imagery in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” comes from the Herman Melville novel, *Moby Dick*. Dylan’s first character introduction is the character of Captain Arab which is a reference to Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*. The illusive ‘white whale’ known as Moby Dick is subtly mentioned to demonstrate the grip that the idealized American dream has on the world’s migrating population. Many have also noticed the use of the sea shanty, “Haul on the Bowline” to reinforce the idea of the narrator as a traveling sailor. A commenter also suggested that Dylan is critical of religion in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”. The narrator goes seek shelter from a patriotic family with an American Flag hanging high. The family turns him away and the narrator slyly compares himself to Jesus. In these ways Dylan includes imagery from these uniquely American qualities of history, literature, and religion. These uniquely American qualities are used by one commentator to create a Meta song meaning that critiques American history, literature, and religion by using imagery from American history, literature, and religion.

One thing mentioned in every source used in this research was the comedy and humor used in writing and producing “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”. The beginning of the song is famous for its false start. The band fails to join in on cue and the whole studio erupts into a contagious laughter. The producer, Tom Wilson, is heard over the speaker to “go again, go again” through gasps of laughter. This hilarious false start sets the tone for the wacky story that is told in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”. The humor in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” is credited to not only the outlandish and seemingly random lyrics; but also to the relationship of the band and Dylan. That false start will always set the tone for the song and while the humor in the lyrics may fade with time, the laughter heard in the first take will always bring a wide smile to the listener. The fast pace of this song also illustrated the cohesiveness that this new band already had with Dylan. *Bringing It All Back Home* was Bob Dylan’s introduction to rock and roll sounding songs. The band helped Dylan achieve his place in rock and roll history through the sounds of the A side of *Bringing It All Back Home*.

“Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”
Written by Bob Dylan¹

I was riding on the Mayflower²
When I thought I spied some land
I yelled for Captain Arab³
I have yuh understand
Who came running to the deck
Said, “Boys, forget the whale
Look on over yonder
Cut the engines
Change the sail
Haul on the bowline”⁴
We sang that melody
Like all tough sailors do
When they are far away at sea

“I think I’ll call it America”
I said as we hit land
I took a deep breath
I fell down, I could not stand
Captain Arab he started
Writing up some deeds
He said, “Let’s set up a fort
And start buying the place with beads”
Just then this cop comes down the street
Crazy as a loon
He throw us all in jail
For carryin’ harpoons

Ah me I busted out
Don’t even ask me how

¹ The chord progression of this song is the same as a previous song from Dylan, “Motorpsycho Nightmare”, which appeared on the 1964 album *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. “Motorpsycho Nightmare” is another Dylan song that tells a story with similar wild imagery to “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” (Every Bob Dylan Song).

² The false start at the beginning of this song was due to the band missing their cue to join in with Dylan (Schlansky).

³ Captain Arab is a comical reference to Captain Ahab of *The Pequod*, a whaling boat, in *Moby Dick* (1851) written by Herman Melville. Dylan has spoken about Melville as an inspiration before and even talks about *Moby Dick* in his 2016 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature (Bob Dylan-Nobel Lecture). In the movie version of *Moby Dick* (1956), Captain Ahab is played by Gregory Peck, one of Dylan’s favorite actors. Gregory Peck is mentioned directly in the song “Brownsville Girl”; “Well, I’m standing in a rain to see a movie starring Gregory Peck” (The Bob Dylan Commentaries).

⁴ “Haul on the Bowline” was a song on the *Foc’sle Songs and Shanties* (1959) and was introduced to Bob Dylan by his friend and fellow folk artist, John Koerner. Sea Shanties were work songs commonly sung by sailors while they rowed to keep the cadence or to lift spirits while working. “Haul on the Bowline” is known as one of the oldest sea shanties (The Bob Dylan Commentaries).

I went to get some help
I walked by a Guernsey cow
Who directed me down
To the Bowery slums⁵
Where people carried signs around
Saying, “Ban the bums”
I jumped right into line
Sayin’, “I hope that I’m not late”
When I realized I hadn’t eaten
For five days straight

I went into a restaurant
Lookin’ for the cook
I told them I was the editor
Of a famous etiquette book
The waitress he was handsome
He wore a powder blue cape
I ordered some suzette, I said
“Could you please make that crepe”
Just then the whole kitchen exploded
From boilin’ fat
Food was flying everywhere⁶
And I left without my hat

Now, I didn’t mean to be nosy
But I went into a bank
To get some bail for Arab
And all the boys back in the tank
They asked me for some collateral
And I pulled down my pants
They threw me in the alley
When up comes this girl from France
Who invited me to her house
I went, but she had a friend
Who knocked me out
And robbed my boots
And I was on the street again

Well, I rapped upon a house

⁵ Bowery is on Manhattan Island in New York City. During the Civil War, Bowery shared a border with the “Five Points” slum. Those who lived in Bowery were commonly referred to as “Bowery Bums”. Bowery became home to immigrants during a period of high immigration rates in America. Throughout the song Dylan is telling a tale of the narrators own kind of migration to America on the *Mayflower*. It is only fitting that he would be directed to an area with an immigrant population (TheBoweryHouse.com)

⁶ Earlier in the song the narrator mentions that he “hadn’t eaten for five days straight” and now this stanza shows the irony of that statement as food flies all around the narrator yet he still has not and cannot eat.

With the U.S. flag upon display
I said, "Could you help me out
I got some friends down the way"
The man says, "Get out of here
I'll tear you limb from limb"
I said, "You know they refused Jesus, too"
He said, "You're not Him"⁷
Get out of here before I break your bones
I ain't your pop"
I decided to have him arrested
And I went looking for a cop

I ran right outside
And I hopped inside a cab
I went out the other door
This Englishman said, "Fab"
As he saw me leap a hot dog stand
And a chariot that stood
Parked across from a building
Advertising brotherhood
I ran right through the front door
Like a hobo sailor does
But it was just a funeral parlor
And the man asked me who I was

I repeated that my friends
Were all in jail, with a sigh
He gave me his card
He said, "Call me if they die"
I shook his hand and said goodbye
Ran out to the street
When a bowling ball came down the road
And knocked me off my feet
A pay phone was ringing
It just about blew my mind
When I picked it up and said hello
This foot came through the line

Well, by this time I was fed up
At tryin' to make a stab
At bringin' back any help
For my friends and Captain Arab

⁷ Clinton Heylin writes about this stanza as Dylan being critical of the puritan pilgrims (Heylin 229). The puritans came to the "New World" to escape religious oppression in England. Evan Schlansky also points out that by using the line "they refused Jesus too", Dylan is comparing himself to Jesus. Schlansky suggests that Dylan is commenting on his fans admiration for him in a comical way (Schlansky).

I decided to flip a coin
Like either heads or tails
Would let me know if I should go
Back to ship or back to jail
So I hocked my sailor suit
And I got a coin to flip
It came up tails
It rhymed with sails
So I made it back to the ship⁸

Well, I got back and took
The parkin' ticket off the mast
I was ripping it to shreds
When this coastguard boat went past
They asked me my name
And I said, "Captain Kidd"⁹
They believed me but
They wanted to know
What exactly that I did
I said for the Pope of Eruke
I was employed
They let me go right away
They were very paranoid

Well, the last I heard of Arab
He was stuck on a whale
That was married to the deputy
Sheriff of the jail
But the funniest thing was
When I was leavin' the bay
I saw three ships a-sailin'¹⁰

⁸ This stanza is notable for the way that Dylan uses rhyming. The narrator claims that since tails rhymed with sails that he should go back to the ship, but tails also rhymed with jail. Dylan includes jails and sails into the rhyme scheme to show the way that the narrator already has his mind made up when deciding whether or not to go help his friends.

⁹ Captain William Kidd was a privateer for the European royals during the 15th Century. He and his crew attacked the Armenian ship, the *Quadegh Merchant*, for its treasure. He was hanged for piracy because of this attack. It is believed that he had buried his newly obtained treasure on an island in the Caribbean. Captain Kidd's legend of his treasure has been credited to sparking the fascination that many people have of pirates and their supposed treasures. There have been some questions asked about the evidence presented during Captain Kidd's trial. Some historians believe that the evidence may not have actually been able to accurately produce a guilty verdict because some of the evidence used during his piracy case was suppressed at the time (Britannica.com).

¹⁰ The three boats being referenced to in this line are the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*. These three boats were used on Christopher Columbus' expedition to find a western route to Asia. Columbus

They were all heading my way
I asked the captain what his name was
And how come he didn't drive a truck
He said his name was Columbus
I just said, "Good luck"¹¹

ending up landing in North America instead and is credited for the "founding" of North America (History.com).

¹¹ Evan Schlansky writes about how the ending to the song connects back to the album title that it appeared on, *Bringing it all Back Home*. The narrator is returning home to the ship and so he is literally "bring it all back home" (Schlansky). What he is bringing home is the strange tale of what happened to him on this land, which is then manifested in the song "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream".

Annotated Bibliography

"Bob Dylan - Nobel Lecture". *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 20 Nov 2017.
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/dylan-lecture.html.
Accessed 17 November 2017.

Bob Dylan won a Nobel Prize for Literature in June 2017. His acceptance speech focuses on the three works of literature that influenced his work as an artist. Those three books were *Moby Dick*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Odyssey*. While discussing *Moby Dick*, Dylan mentions the allegorical imagery and his interpretations of them. Dylan gives a quick synopsis of the story and the imagery used. At the end of his discussion on *Moby Dick* Dylan says, "that theme and all that it implies would work its way into more than a few of [his] songs" (Bob Dylan- Nobel Lecture). "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" was one of the songs that incorporated the theme of *Moby Dick*.

One of the major themes of *Moby Dick* is the illusiveness of the 'White Whale' A.K.A Moby Dick. Captain Ahab's obsession with killing Moby drives the tragedy and triumph of the story. In the very first stanza we see the character of Captain Arab hastily give up on hunting the whale in his eagerness to get to this new land of America. This illustrates the siren like draw that America has on many. An obsessed man was able to quickly give up on his obsession at just the sight of America. The story in the song continues and shows how America is not all that great. The people there throw them in jail, the narrator is robbed and starved, and nobody will help the narrator get his friends out of jail. This again illustrates the idea of the modern citizens being savage in their own manner. *Moby Dick* also has religious allegories. *Moby Dick*, himself, is supposed to represent God and purity. In one stanza Dylan compares himself to Jesus. These references show how the novel of *Moby Dick* influenced Dylan in writing "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream".

"Bob Dylan's 115th Dream." *The Bob Dylan Commentaries*,
www.bobdylancommentaries.com/bringing-it-all-back-home/bob-dylans-115-dream/.
Accessed 16 November 2017.

This website includes all bob Dylan songs with commentaries by way of online forum. The commentary on "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" is centered around the use of sailor and sea faring imagery. The first half of this commentary focuses on Dylan's use of *Moby Dick* references. The author, who is unnamed, first shares Dylan's obvious admiration for the author of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville. It is also shared that Dylan might have been influenced in his love for *Moby Dick* from the 1956 film version of the book starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab. Gregory Peck has been mentioned before in "Brownsville Girl" (1986) as one of his favorite actors. The author suggests that both the book and the movie influenced Dylan in writing this song. Captain Arab in the song is an obvious reference to Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick* but there are other, smaller, references to the story of *Moby Dick*. The mention of lampoons connects the lyrics back to the story of the whaling boat, *the Pequod*, in *Moby Dick*. The author also suggests that the mention of the Sea Shanties in the lyrics also tie in with the theme of *Moby Dick* references. The sea shanty mentioned by Dylan was "Haul on the Bowline". This song was introduced to him by fellow folk artist, John Koerner. "Haul on the Bowline" was featured on the album *Foc'sle Songs*

and Shanties (1959) which Dylan had listened to many times, back-to-back. Another close friend of Dylan's, Dave Van Ronk played a version of "Haul on the Bowline" as well.

The author also mentions the historical context that is presented in "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream". In this telling of 'the founding' of America, the narrator is the foreigner who is met by modern day Americans instead of the Native Americans that history tells us were living on the land. The author claims that the narrator is met with "calamities and indignities dealt out by the ignorant savage natives" (The Bob Dylan Commentaries). In this case, the savage natives are not the Native American Indians that Columbus was met with but are actually modern-day Americans. Therefore, the 'good luck' remark to Columbus at the end of the song is meant to be humorous and witty.

Heylin, Clinton. *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973*, Chicago Review Press, 2012, pp. 228-229

This book includes all songs written by Bob Dylan during the period of 1957 to 1973 along with an analysis based review by the author, Clinton Heylin. The beginning of this review starts with a quote from Bob Dylan in a 1966 interview with Jules Siegel. In this interview Dylan claims that he "sees thing that other people don't see.... They laugh" (Heylin 228). Heylin suggests that Dylan was referring to "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" in that quote. Dylan's imagery in "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" is purposefully comical in its attempt to criticize American history, literature, and religion.

Heylin also talks about the backup bands importance in this song. The false start at the beginning plays an important role for the introduction to the song. Heylin notes that despite the band failing to keep pace in the first take, the second take was perfect. The night before Dylan, by himself, was able to complete this song a full minute and thirty seconds faster than the band and Dylan did in the second take. By keeping in the false start Dylan shows how this new experience of working with a band is both challenging and fun. Heylin talks about how the fast pace of the song illustrates the "sureness" of Dylan as a musician. This sureness, although, is now "long gone" (Heylin 229) according to Heylin. Dylan performed the song after many years in October 1988 because of a request from his oldest son, Jesse Dylan. Heylin claims that this performance lacked the sureness it once had. The performance was "something of a drag" (Heylin 229) and it ironically reinforced the songs idea of making mistakes by not learning from historical experiences

Schlansky, Evan. "The 30 Greatest Bob Dylan Songs: #23 'Bob Dylan's 115th Dream' American Songwriter." *American Songwriter*, 14 Feb. 2013, americansongwriter.com/2009/04/the-30-greatest-bob-dylan-songs-23-bob-dylans-115th-dream/. Accessed 17 November 2017.

This article post from American Songwriter discusses why "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" is so successful. Author of the post, Evan Schlansky, suggests that Dylan's ability to make his fans laugh remains an important part of the songs success. Schlansky talks about how despite Dylan's sound changing from Woody Guthrie influenced folk to plugged in rock and roll; Dylan's fans loved him for his humor. According to Schlansky, Bob Dylan's humor even inspired The Beatles. John Lennon was influenced by Dylan's "delight for surrealist wordplay" (Schlansky).

Two years after the release of *Bringing It All Back Home*, John Lennon wrote “rockinghorse people eating marshmallow pies” which Schlansky believes was written with “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” in mind.

Something that Evan Schlansky believes is notable in this song is Dylan’s story telling ability. Dylan was showing off his ability to write a song without a plan. The lyrics are so random yet cohesive that Schlansky believes that Dylan was just “spinning a yarn” (Schlansky) based on whatever popped into Dylan’s head. Dylan’s ability to bend language to fit his rhyme scheme was something else that Schlansky admired. The rhyming in the end of the song is also critical to the listeners opinion of the narrator. The narrator bases his decision whether to go back for his friends or not based on a coin flip. When the coin lands on tails and the narrator claims that since tails rhymes with sails he will go back to the ship. Tails also rhymes with jail and so we see that the narrator already had his mind set on what he wanted to do even before he tossed the coin.

Tony. “Every Bob Dylan Song.” *Bob Dylan Song #54: Bob Dylan's 115th Dream*, 9 Nov. 2008, everybobdylansong.blogspot.com/2008/11/bob-dylan-song-54-bob-dylans-115th.html. Accessed 18 November 2017

This blog, who’s author is known by Tony, is an opinion based site that also serves as a commentary page where several people can express their own opinions of Bob Dylan’s songs. Tony suggests in this post that “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” is a prime example of how Dylan’s writing style is more complex than other popular song during the sixties. The song is full of allusions that may be hard to catch if someone purely focusses on the goofy and seemingly random lyrics. One thing that Tony is sure of is that Dylan had a start and a finish when writing this song. The beginning has him coming in on *The Mayflower* and the end has him passing by Christopher Columbus while leaving. The beginning and the end of the song connect and are planned out while the story in between is more random. Everything still works and connects together well, it just requires more of a deep read than other songs.

Tony also mentions the American elements and the meta vibe that they contribute to in the song. Moby Dick, Columbus, and the Bowery are all innately American. The fact that Bob Dylan is also a prominent figure in Folk music, which is also rooted in American tradition, contributes to the Americana feelings. Tony suggests that this song is so deeply influenced by American traditions and symbolism that it is ironic in its criticism of America. Tony writes about this in saying that by Dylan “turning our traditions and cultural bedrocks into a gag, turns out to be uniquely American as well” (Tony).